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ABSTRACT

COMMON PITFALLS ENCOUNTERED IN THE TEACHING OF LATIN COMPOSITION ARE ATTRIBUTED VARIOUSLY TO INADEQUATE GRAMMAR-EXPLANATION APPROACHES, ILL-PLANNED TEXTBOOKS, AND CERTAIN TRANSLATION EXERCISES FROM ENGLISH TO LATIN. OTHER WEAKNESSES, PARTICULARLY THE ENGLISH-LATIN VOCABULARY PROBLEM, ARE DISCUSSED. THE AUTHOR RESOLVES PROBLEMATIC AREAS THROUGH THE IMITATION OF ANCIENT AUTHORS. SPECIFIC TEACHING TECHNIQUES ARE SPELLED OUT USING THE TEXTS OF CICERO'S "SOMNIUM SCIPIONIS" AND TWO LETTERS BY PLINY. THE LATIN AND ENGLISH TEXTS CITED ARE FOUND IN THE APPENDIX. (RL)

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SUGGESTIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF LATIN COMPOSITION

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I do not intend to give here a ringing defense of Latin composition. I take for granted the crucial value of composition, especially at the third year level, functioning as it does as a keystone to any College Latin program, by reviewing and pulling together everything that has been learned so far, and preparing for all future work in Latin by exposing some of the subtleties of Latin means of expression.

The teacher of Latin composition has at hand a variety of texts.[1] In their general format these are quite similar, varying mainly in the degree of their difficulty. The most famous of the lot is the venerable Bradley's Arnold (now Mountford's Bradley's Arnold). These books generally divide into three sections: (1) grammatical discussions, followed by (2) English sentences to be turned into Latin, and (3) an extensive English-Latin vocabulary.

Each section involves certain short-comings. The grammatical explanations and the sentences that follow them usually raise only one problem at a time. Often some of the characteristic Latin constructions (e.g. Indirect Discourse and Sequence of Tenses) are put off until the middle or end of the book. The practice of presenting the student with only individual sentences to translate avoids the peculiar Latin devise of linking one sentence to the next, and, more generally, the whole problem of the Latin sentence which as a unit of thought differs markedly from its English counterpart.

A more serious criticism is the frequently arcane English of the sentences to be translated. Here are two random examples from Bradley's Arnold:

1) The cavalry charged so fiercely that, had not night interfered with the contest, the enemy would have turned their backs.

2) I said this with the intention of being of use to him and pleasing him, yet I should have had to put up with his abuse and insults.

Difficulties arise for the student because of the dated style of English employed in many of these texts, some of which were written near or before the turn of the century. Frequently, however, awkward English results from an attempt to make the required Latin constructions as transparent as possible. This practice, which is pedagogically indefensible, results, more often than not, in greater confusion on the part of the student, as any teacher faced with lest = "ne and the subjunctive" well knows.

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The English-Latin vocabulary, no matter how extensive, gives rise to error. Its very presence at the back of the book encourages the strong tendency among students to look up individual words rather than to translate for sense. Moreover, it skirts one of the greatest difficulties of Latin: namely, that one Latin word may often have ten or twenty English equivalents, given the patrii sermonis egestas of which Lucretius was already aware.

In addition to the above specific criticisms, there are certain general objections to the approach to teaching Latin composition implicit in these texts. Latin grammar is presented largely in a vacuum as a set of rules to be mechanically applied (except for the exceptions which appear in fine print at the bottom of the page). More serious is the prospect of a student spending a semester or a year in a Latin course without seeing any real Latin. I would rather have my students stare uncomprehendingly at Latin than at incomprehensible English.

My cure for all these ills is not astoundingly new. Actually, it is quite old fashioned. I suggest a return to the teaching of Latin composition through imitation of ancient authors.[2] Do not misunderstand me. I do not recommend writing Ciceronian diatribes against modern Catilines or Antonys, nor Tacitean accounts of the administration of a President Johnson. While such productions may have been the crowning adornment of an 18th century English gentlemen's education, they also represent a prodigious waste of time for today's Latin student. What I would advise is close imitation of specific Latin passages.

Instead of giving you a theoretical account, let me provide you with some of the exercises used in the course of last semester and describe the procedure used in class. For the model, I decided to make use of Cicero, since he represents a canon of Latin usage. Rather than one of his orations, however, which so often require a thorough grounding in Roman history and legal procedure, I chose the Somnium Scipionis,[3] both because of its literary and philosophical interest and because it contains passages of varying degrees of difficulty.

The first exercise before you is based on the two opening paragraphs of the Somnium (see the Appendix). On the surface it presents only slight variations from its model, but it contains a good number of grammatical problems and idiomatic expressions. A second example drawn from Chapters 9-10 of the Somnium (see the Appendix) offers a much greater challenge. There is no reason, however, why this kind of exercise cannot be used on a lower level. The third example before you is modelled on two letters of Pliny to his wife which provided both instruction (especially in the genitive and dative cases) and amusement to my second year class. (See the Appendix)

You will immediately realize that such exercises tax neither the creativity nor the vast stores of imagination that the student may possess. Banished from the Latin composition class, they may be called upon fruitfully in the student's other courses. No new vocabulary is introduced. English-Latin dictionaries are forbidden, thereby avoiding the single most common source of composition errors.

Class time is spent in translation and grammatical analysis of the Latin text. Grammars were constantly in hand. With occasional help from the instructor, the students looked up the pertinent rules, and explanations were read aloud. When the exercise was distributed, students were encouraged to reread Latin model passages three or four times and to be able to account for every grammatical form and usage it contained before turning to the English.

The majority of the student's time, then, is occupied in studying Latin rather than English, and almost all errors made result from misconstruing Latin instead of English. After the papers have been marked and mistakes underlined, errors are corrected in class. Reference is made not only to grammatical rules, but also to the usage of the Latin author, in this case, Cicero. Where alternatives are possible, the class considers which is most in keeping with the author's regular usage or style.

Here I touch upon a significant positive value of this kind of exercise that goes beyond the purely mimetic. The student should become convinced that Latin is not simply a collection of abstract grammatical precepts, but usage, and that the usage of an author is his style. This imitation of model passages can be used to inculcate a sensitivity to style, so difficult for any teacher to convey. If, for instance, on an advanced level, after the students have spent a good deal of time with Cicero, a passage of Sallust or Tacitus is introduced for imitation, the students cannot help but notice that their method of composing a sentence, their usage and syntax, are quite different.

By keeping Latin texts before the student at all times, the differences between Latin and English are not minimized, nor are they presented in purely theoretical terms. The student is invited to observe empirically the practice of Latin writers and to develop a sense for Latin style.

Everyone would agree that Latin composition is an essential but ancillary tool for the reading and understanding of Latin authors, but not an end in itself. While the composition books tend to divorce writing of Latin from reading, the method here proposed constantly keeps the end in view.

APPENDIX

M. TULLI CICERONIS

SOMNIUM SCIPIONIS.

1. Cum in Africam venissem M'. Manilio consuli ad quartam legionem tribunus, ut scitis, militum, nihil mihi fuit potius quam ut Masinissam convenirem regem, familiae nostrae iustis de causis amicissimum. Ad quem ut veni, complexus me senex collacrimavit aliquantoque post suspexit in caelum et: Grates, inquit, tibi ago, summe Sol, vobisque, reliqui Caelites, quod ante quam ex hac vita migro conspicio in meo regno et in his tectis P. Cornelium Scipionem, cuius ego nomine ipso recreor, ita numquam ex animo meo discedit illius optimi atque invictissimi viri memoria. Deinde ego illum de suo regno, ille me de nostra re publica percontatus est, multisque verbis ultro citroque habitis ille nobis consumptus est dies.

2. Post autem apparatu regio accepti sermonem in multam noctem produximus, cum senex nihil nisi de Africano loqueretur omniaque eius non facta solum, sed etiam dicta meminisset. Deinde, ut cubitum discessimus, me et de via fessum et qui ad multam noctem vigilassem, artior quam solebat somnus complexus est.

Exercise I

Scipio, a very good friend of my family, had come to Africa to meet me in my palace. When he arrived in my kingdom, I embraced him weeping, and after giving thanks to the celestial powers, I gave him a royal welcome. That day and much of the night we spent in talking. When I asked him about his grandfather, there was nothing he liked more than to talk about that old man, whom I shall never forget. Finally, tired but refreshed by our conversation, I went to bed, but he stayed up late into the night before he fell asleep.

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9. Quam cum magis intuerer: Quaeso, inquit Africanus, quousque humi defixa tu mens erit? Nonne aspicis quae in templa veneris? Novem tibi orbibus vel potius globis connexa sunt omnia, quorum unus caelestis est extimus, qui reliquos omnes complectitur, summus ipse deus arcens et continens caeteros: in quo sunt infixi illi, qui volvuntur, stellarum cursus sempiterni: cui subiecti septem, qui versantur retro contrario motu atque caelum, ex quibus unum globum possidet illa, quam in terris Saturniam nominant. Deinde est hominum generi prosperus et salutaris ille

fulgor, qui dicitur Iovis: tum rutilus horribilisque terris, quem Martium dicitis: deinde subter mediam fere regionem Sol obtinet, dux et princeps et moderator luminum reliquorum, mens mundi et temperatio, tanta magnitudine, ut cuncta sua luce lustret et compleat. Hunc ut comites consequuntur Veneris alter, alter Mercurii cursus, in infimoque orbe Luna radiis solis accensa convertitur. Infra autem iam nihil est nisi mortale et caducum praeter animos munera deorum hominum generi datos, supra Lunam sunt aeterna omnia. Nam ea quae est media et nona tellus neque movetur et infima est et in eam feruntur omnia nutu sua pondera.

10. Quae cum intuerer stupens, ut me recepi: Quis hic, inquam, quis est, qui complet aures meas tantus et tam dulcis sonus? Hic est, inquit ille, qui intervallis coniunctus imparibus, sed tamen pro rata parte ratione distinctis impulsu et motu ipsorum orbium conficitur et acuta cum gravibus temperans varios aequabiliter concentus efficit: nec enim silentio tanti motus incitari possunt et natura fert ut extrema ex altera parte graviter, ex altera autem acute sonent. Quam ob causam summus ille caeli stellifer cursus, cuius conversio est concitatior, acuto et excitato movetur sono, gravissimo autem hic lunaris atque infimus: nam terra nona immobilis manens una sede semper haeret complexa medium mundi locum. Illi autem octo cursus, in quibus eadem vis est duorum, septem efficiunt distinctos intervallis sonos: qui numerus rerum omnium fere nodus est, quod docti homines nervis imitati atque cantibus aperuerunt sibi reditum in hunc locum, sicut alii, qui praestantibus ingeniis in vita humana divina studia coluerunt.

Exercise II

Africanus pointed out to Scipio the nine planets and their orbits and said that the outermost orbit was divine and contained all the other planets which moved in a contrary direction. When Scipio asked what that sound was which filled his ears, Africanus told him that the planets by their motion in the orbits produced tones; that the outermost planets, which men call Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars, produced proportionally higher tones, while the lunar orbit produced the lowest tone; it was natural, however that the earth produced no sound since it never moved from its place. He added that men on earth were not able to hear these celestial sounds, but remembering those which they had heard in heaven, they learned to imitate them in their singing.

Pliny to his Wife

(23)

A love letter to his wife:

C. Plinius Calpurniae suae S. Scribis te absentiā meā non mediocriter affici unumque habere solacium, quod pro me libellos meos teneas, saepe etiam in vestigio meo colloces. Gratum est quod nos requiris,

gratum quod his fomentis acquiescis. Invicem ego epistulas tuas lectito atque identidem in manus quasi novas sumo, sed eo magis ad desiderium tui accendor. Nam cuius litterae tantum habent suavitatis, huius sermonibus quantum dulcedinis inest! Tu tamen quam frequentissime scribe, licet hoc ita me delectet ut torqueat. Vale.

(24)

Another love letter to his wife:

C. Plinius Calpurniae suae S. Incredibile est quanto desiderio tui tenear. In causā amor primum, deinde quod non consuevimus abesse. Inde est quod magnam noctium partem in imagine tua vigil exigo; inde quod interdiu, quibus horis te visere solebam, ad diaetam tuam ipsi me (ut verissime dicitur) pedes ducunt; quod denique aeger et maestus ac similis excluso a vacuo limine recedo. Unum tempus his tormentis caret, quo in foro amicorum litibus conteror. Aestima tu, quae vita mea sit, cui requies in labore, in miseria curisque solacium. Vale.

Exercise III

Dear Pliny,

You write that you miss me and that you stay awake a good part of the night because we are not used to being apart. Your longing for me pleases me, but your letters contain so much sadness and love that they torture me.

You have one solace in your work and in your friends. But consider what tortures are mine in your absence! Like a sick woman, I stare at your picture and constantly read your sweet books over and over. It is unbelievable how much solace they give me.

In order to please you, I shall write as often as possible.

Love,

Calpurnia.

NOTES

1 E.g. Charles E. Bennett, A New Latin Composition, New York, 1919; E.C. Marchant and G. Watson, Latin Prose Composition, London, 1929; James Mountford, ed. 'Bradley's Arnold' Latin Prose Composition, New York, 1938.

2 This approach is inspired by the Advanced Greek Composition class taught by Professor John B. McDiarmid at the University of Washington.

3 J.F. Stout, ed. (London, n.d.) University Tutorial Press.